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ABSTRACT

The active duty Army has approximately 400,000 families who on a daily basis interact with the largest military system in the world. An all-pervasive culture unto itself, the Army affects the lives of each one of these people. This research was begun in order to look at the effects which this lifestyle has and how individuals and families structure their environment to cope with it. Coping styles of 18 healthy Army families were examined qualitatively. Healthy families were defined as those who were without overt clinical symptoms of pathology, who enjoyed military life, and who had chosen the military as a career. Data were gathered by means of intensive, unstructured interviews, and by administration of Moos's Family Environment Scale. Five distinctive healthy coping styles were identified and are perceived to be consonant with the lifestyle of military families. These family styles include: apathetic-independence; individual personal growth; expression-oriented; expressive-conflict; and structure-oriented. (ABL)

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Typology of Army Families: Coping Styles of Successful, Career Army Families[1,2,3]

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Abstract

This is a qualitative study of the coping styles of 18 healthy Army families. Healthy families are defined as those who are without overt clinical symptoms of pathology, who enjoy military life, and who have chosen the military as a career. Data were gathered by means of intensive, unstructured interviews, and by administration of Moos's Family Environment Scale. Five distinctive healthy coping styles were identified and are perceived to be consonant with the lifestyle of military families.

The active duty Army has approximately 400,000 families, roughly one and a half million people who, on a daily basis, interact with the largest military system in the world. An all-pervasive culture unto itself, the Army effects the lives of each one of these people, to a greater or lesser degree, every day of their lives. This research (Smith, 1988) was begun in order to look at the effects which this lifestyle has and how individuals and families structure their environment to cope with it.

Method

The first step in the research was the identification of families to study. The question was: "How can we tell what is a healthy family?" From a strict scientific standpoint, there is no agreed upon definition of health. However, based on prior research and clinical experience, a measure of health was assumed from an absence of overt pathology. Families who appeared to be healthy, who said they were happy, who were successful in the Army system and demonstrated a degree of satisfaction with Army life, and who volunteered for this research were assumed to meet the needs of this definition. A variety of methods were used to recruit families. Recommendations were made by family "experts", commanders, and by the families themselves. All families were volunteers.

A pilot study, with eight families, was conducted. These interviews were loosely structured around general questions about Army life. This led to wide discussions about Army life. In addition, Moos and Moos's (1981) Family Environment Scale (FES) was administered to each family.

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[1] The author wishes to thank Dr. Charlene Lewis for her contribution to the original research on which this paper is based.

[2] The ideas presented in this paper are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the U.S. Army.

[3] This paper is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, 1988.

The FES was used an an objective measure to assess the families' environments. For Moos and Moos, the formula of behavior is B=f(P,E), where B is behavior, a Function (f) of People (P) and the Environment (E). The FES consists of ninety true/false questions. The FES is divided into three main dimensions which are divided into ten scales. There are the three relationship dimensions of cohesion, expressiveness, and conflict; the five personal growth dimensions of independence, achievement orientation, intellectual-cultural orientation, active recreational orientation, and moral-religious emphasis; and the two system maintenance dimensions of organization and control.

For the final section of the research, it was decided that a more systematic investigation of the problems and solutions of Army life was needed. A structured survey was developed from the themes uncovered during the pilot study. It was felt that a structured survey would lead to more complete and more easily comparable data. Ten families were selected for the final interviews.

Normative data were collected on the families through specific questions. The families were then asked the general question: "What have you seen as major problems in being an Army family?" After some discussion, they were told: "Stop, let us discuss one of these problems in detail." As the discussion around the identified problem continued, the families were asked why the issue was a problem; the number of times they had encountered the problem; how they had dealt with the problem; what help they had received, and from whom; and the resources that they found available. For each identified problem, their coping strategies, type resources, and types of successes were constantly looked for, discussed, and written down. In the same fashion, more identified problems were discussed. Specific questions were available to use if the families got stuck. A typical question was: "Tell me about how you moved to this military community."

After the discussion of problems in being an Army family, the families were asked to make a list of generic problems. They were asked to list general problems that Army families face and the assistance that Army families have available. After this point, the families were given the FES.

The general purpose of the interviews was to distill the behaviors of the families that were their mechanisms of coping with the military system. While a structured format was used for the new interviews, the responses were open-ended.

Eighteen families, combined from the pilot and final studies, are not representative of the entire Army in terms of surface variables, and this small sample size should not be considered representative of the current total population of Army families. It is, in fact, a skewed selection - but skewed for the purpose of illustrating the point of the research. In general, successful, older career families were interviewed. However, these families had been stationed all over the world. They were once recruits too. It was hoped that this sample was representative of successful career families in the Army.

Results

Two problems surfaced during this research. One problem was the definition of a healthy family. Despite the breath of our operational definition, our definition was not totally satisfactory. Despite meeting our criteria for being a healthy family, some of these families would not meet our stereotypic view of the "happy" family nor would we choose them for

"best friends". In several cases, our healthy families were neither likable nor happy. Meeting our criteria did not necessarily mean that a family was generically healthy or that they would be so in a different environment. It did say, however, that each family functioned well and had gained satisfaction from their lifestyles within their specific environment.

A second problem with this research was how to categorize these families in analyzing the parameters of healthy families? Two lines of research proved fruitful.

Stinnett and DeFrain's (1985) work with families identified six areas of healthy families. These were: Commitment, Appreciation, Communication, Time, Spiritual Wellness, and Coping Ability. These six characteristics of strong families are an important theoretical construct which gave us clues about healthy Army families. Because the interviewed families, for the most part, exhibited these characteristics, the research focused on the last characteristic, our research variable of coping.

However, analyzing specific coping behaviors was difficult. Part of the problem, and confusion, with this research was the different attitudes of families toward Army life. There were unseen variables operating in their choices. For example, some families preferred to live in Army housing, others wanted to live off-post, some families liked or accepted mandatory social events, while others didn't and/or wouldn't. These wide ranges of likes and dislikes seemed to be too random to make sense.

It did make sense, however, to look at how the families interacted with the Army environment and how they structured their environment. Moos and Moos's (1976) cluster analysis of family FES profiles was used to categorize the families. In their original sample, Moos and Moos identified six major cluster types. These were sub-divided into 12 cluster types of family social environments. Grouping the families under Moos's clusters supplied some order to what appeared to be whimsical preferences and attitudes. While the Army families were originally grouped by their FES profiles, they could be grouped by what they said in their interviews.

Five distinct coping styles were identified from the sample families. These coping styles are from a combination of Moos's 12 clusters types. Each type coped somewhat differently; they viewed and related to the system differently; and, they formed a sense of community differently. It was very interesting to note the differences in percentages of families in the cluster types between Moos's sample and our sample of Army families. While this is not a random sample of Army families, and no claim is made that families in this research are statistically representative of Army families, the differences in percentages of cluster types is striking. In summary, these differences are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of Family Cluster Type Distributions

	Moos %	Army %
Apathetic-independence	3	22
Individual personal growth	51	17
Expression-oriented	9	17
Expressive conflict	3	11
Structure-oriented	8	33
Conflict-oriented	26	0

Army families are significantly under-represented in the individual personal growth cluster type and over-represented in the apathetic-independence and structure-oriented cluster types. The sample, when compared to Moos's, is probably skewed by age. Army families, by their nature, are young. This would lead to differences in the family life-cycle stages; but, this is not enough to explain all the differences. The Army families' average FES subscale scores, in general, are well within one standard deviation above or below the mean. This little difference, in a broad sense, seems to indicate that the sample families are fairly representative of families in general. This might indicate that these differences exist, not because of a skewed sample of Army families, but because Army families use specific coping styles.

Apathetic-independence families see the Army as an amorphous structure, and they have a very narrow view of their place in the system. This was our second largest group, and their coping style was very recognizable.

Individual personal growth families include the six separate personal growth dimension clusters of expressive-independence, structured-independence, achievement-via-independence, achievement-via-conformity, unstructured moral-religious, and structured moral-religious. Because these sub-groups are more alike than different, they have been combined into one group. These sub-groups believe in an Army system, but they feel they are separate from it. They believe they can gain command of it through their own personal development. What separates these families from each other are their views of the Army system and their techniques for personal development.

Expression-oriented families view the Army as a means to an end, whereas they appear to have less control over their lives and therefore let the system manipulate them at will. For them, their situation is temporary and therefore managable, as it is a means to their end goal of Army life.

Expressive-conflict families believe the Army can provide things but will probably have to be forced to do its job. Their conflict with system, and each other, occurs within a reasonable structured and controlled environment and appears to produce an adaptation to the system for them.

Structure-oriented families view the Army as an end goal. In other words, the Army provides them with the things they want. They view themselves in and of the structure of the Army. In general, these were the "oldest" families, and they might be the "ideal" end product of almost 20 years of socialization in the Army system.

It was not surprising that there were not any families from the structured and unstructured conflict-oriented family clusters. These families most likely would not meet our definition of a healthy family. They probably would not be successful in the military in attaining much rank or career status nor would they volunteer for this study.

Discussion

We have asked: "What can the Army do to help families?" There seems to be no easy, clearcut answer to this question if families view and deal with the Army system differently. Their coping styles are dependent on how they view the Army system. For example, some types see an amorphous structure while others see a system they have to learn and master. It reasons that Army programs trying to meet the multitude of needs on which such views are predicated are de facto required to be "all things to all people", and thus doomed to failure unless we have a clearer understanding of what, precisely, families mean when they say "I need".

With these five groups of families, we have a spectrum of people's needs and attitudes, with the apathetic-independence families on one end. In general, these families want the Army to provide almost all of their needs, from providing friends to preserving social mores. To best serve them, the Army needs to provide complete, easy programs for them, and indeed, a variety of existing Army programs fit these families.

The other groups of families are on the other end of the spectrum. In general, these families want to be provided with what they consider their just rewards and then left alone. What separates these groups from each other is their involvement with the Army system.

The individual personal growth dimension families feel that they have to work for what they want. They gain, not so much from the structure of the system, but through their individual efforts. They have to feel that they can master the system. The Army needs to provide programs aimed towards personal development that these families can use to grow. The off-duty education program is one such program that the Army provides.

The expression-oriented families feel a lack of control over the system, but also feel the system will take care of them. They get involved mostly with their small work-based units, as they are most comfortable at that level. In general, these are junior and mid-level families, and this cluster type might be the first stage or a passing stage for them as they spend more time in the Army and begin making a more reasoned choice about whether or not to pursue the military as a career. To best serve them, the Army needs to encourage and provide resources for small unit cohesion. These families need to feel they have some control over their small unit activities, as they generally feel that they do not have much control over the formal Army system.

The expressive conflict-oriented families are somewhat different. They feel that they have to fight the system for what they want. It is hard to provide any special considerations for these families, as they tend to want to fight the system, regardless of the ease of access.

Finally, the structure-oriented families feel that they can influence the system. They not only become intimately involved with the system, they need to feel that they belong to it, because it provides the basic structuring of their lives. The Army needs to allow these families to work for the system, because they make the best organizational workers the Army can get. These are the "joiners".

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